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Terrorism heightens cadet resolve

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Long before the Sept. 11 attacks on America, Mount Tahoma High School junior Lawrence Martin was planning to join the military. The U.S. bombing of Afghanistan - and the very real possibility that U.S. soldiers could become casualties - hasn't weakened his commitment. "I believe in freedom with all my heart," he said Monday, sitting with classmates in his Army Junior ROTC class at Mount Tahoma.

"When people try and take away my freedom, I get angry. My fathers and their fathers and their fathers before them were willing to fight for our freedom, and I think everyone else should be willing to now."

The military repercussions of the attacks hold special meaning for many of the Junior ROTC students at the South Tacoma high school, one of many South Sound schools with ROTC programs.

Many are the children of retired or active military personnel, who have settled in South Tacoma, a short drive from Fort Lewis and McChord Air Force Base.

Some of the cadets plan to join the military when they graduate, and for several that decision was prompted by the terrorist attacks.

"What happened at the World Trade Center just sealed it," said Jason Van Wey, a junior whose grandfather and father served in the Army. He plans to sign up for the National Guard under a "split training" arrangement that allows recruits to go through basic training in the summer, finish their last year of high school and then resume Army training the following summer. Freshman Steven Schmidt was considering enlisting in the Army but wasn't sure until Sept. 11. "Now I'm definitely joining the military," he said.

Students who take Junior ROTC classes aren't required to join the armed forces when they graduate. Although they learn about military science, much of the instruction is directed toward attaining leadership skills.

Several cadets said they wholeheartedly supported the U.S. bombings in Afghanistan. "I believe the actions the U.S. took were totally necessary to show (Osama) bin Laden we're not afraid to stand up for our freedom," said Bobby Ballard, a freshman.

"I'm not going to say I'm glad this happened," said Ashley Mangum, a sophomore. "But it needed to happen. This was a wake-up call for America."

Several students expressed concerns that innocent civilians would be hurt or killed despite the United States' intention to target militarily strategic sites.

"The people who didn't have anything to do with it," said sophomore Josh Scheer, "why should they suffer?"

Sophomore Clarence Dalire, another cadet, questioned the need to retaliate with violence at all. He said he was raised to refrain from responding with violence if someone used violence against him.

The nation's increased sense of patriotism hasn't carried over into a unanimous surge of respect for Junior ROTC at Mount Tahoma.

While some cadets said their friends are more interested in taking an ROTC class, most cadets said they still get called "Pickles" when they wear their green Army uniforms to school on Wednesdays.

Some said they were willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for their country.

Robert Gentry, a junior who is applying to West Point, said today's high-tech warfare lessens the chance of death and injury for military personnel. But he's aware of the dangers and willing to take the risk the same as his male predecessors, back to his great-great grandfather in World War I.

"I want to stop what's going on," Gentry said of the terrorists. "I hope I can defend our country and our way of life."

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